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Reciprocal social work and social policy

Conclusions

In his last diary ‘Smiling in Slow Motion’, the late film director and gay activist Derek Jarman (2001, p. 43) reflects on politics in general and admonishes some of his peers for assuming and colluding with the view that ‘steps forward’ always occur through top-down parliamentary legislation. This, he comments,

...is a mistake, steps forward come by the example in our lives...the aim is to open up discourse and with it broader horizons...

What did he mean by this? No doubt many things, but in relation to the themes threaded through the chapters in this book, there is an important message about the everyday relationships we forge and the ways in which we behave to one another, both informally, as citizens in our communities, and formally, in welfare organisations. The ways in which we develop and conduct these relationships can either reinforce or collude with existing inequalities and power imbalances. Alternatively, those social relations can embody a challenge to existing understandings and practices. Developing an approach that we are calling a *reciprocal social work and social policy* is one way in which we offer an alternative to current neoliberal and individualistic approaches.

At the heart of the approach is an emphasis on social relations, which are crucial to our well-being and central to making our lives meaningful or otherwise. There is a robust research knowledge base that illustrates how social relations are assessed differently in different populations but how they consistently have an important and significant influence on health and well-being (see Antonucci *et al.* 2014, p. 83; see also authors in this book). However, it is not enough to be in a social relationship; it is also the quality and form of these relations that matters. If relationships do not last or do not support the well-being of individuals, they can be viewed as one-sided or abusive. Reciprocal relations are based on mutual understanding, respect and trust, which create a sense of equality between different partners. They give a person the feeling that they are respected as a person and do not need to pretend to be someone else.

We have deliberately steered clear of one overarching definition of reciprocity in the book but rather have offered readers a wide interpretation from authors working in different welfare fields and in different cultural contexts. Authors in this book have variously defined 'reciprocity' in relation to philosophy, method and experience. Whilst their definitions are context-specific and drawn from a range of different theorists (such as Becker 1990, Bourdieu 1990, Fiske 1992, Gouldner 1960, Kolm 2008, Sen 2009), there are common themes that run through their discussions:

- Interdependence in relationships, in which people are able to both give and receive support;
- Recognising that people have different things to offer in this mutual exchange, based on their strengths, and acknowledging their vulnerabilities; i.e. an exchange can be both material and immaterial; people can give and take in different forms;
- The quality of relationships that are both egalitarian and mutual, in which all parties are treated fairly and feel listened to and 'heard'
- Reciprocal experiences that are strongly associated with feelings of empathy, satisfaction and even love.

Various mechanisms, attitudes and approaches are identified as critical to the process of building reciprocal relationships, such as trust, humour, co-learning, respect, openness, sympathy and goodwill as well as the conscious creation of spaces for the renegotiation and reshaping of conventional practices. Enablers of these mechanisms are illustrated in different ways throughout the book and include reflective practices, both in professional work and research practices that involve all parties, and the identification of and learning gained from citizens and service-users' own reciprocal practices and networks, which support each other in the community, involving service-users in processes to co-produce social work knowledge that informs policies and practices. Working practices that offer more scope for the traditional practitioner and service-user relationships to be reframed are more likely to engender a reciprocal relationship: for example, the use of group- and community-based services and collaborative methods in research, education and practice. Respecting the different but complementary roles of experiential and professional knowledge is at the heart of enabling policies and practices.

The chapters of this book illuminate citizens' reciprocal actions with each other as embedded both in everyday life activities and in different institutionalised practices linked to social work. However, because people and the systems they create do not always support reciprocal relations – for instance, in forms of corruption or nepotism – there is a need for societal rules that are negotiated by democratic regulations and democratic decision-making based on an understanding of social rights and equalities. That is why both social work and social policy are needed to help promote equality between

citizens in the societies that can support their well-being and create a just social and health service system. Reciprocity, when it is understood positively, is like an ideal type or aim for collectiveness or togetherness in a society. It can also work as a societal goal for social work and social policy and its practice, which is negotiated through political decision-making in certain places and times.

Reciprocity is a particularly important and interesting concept in the context of asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships, such as professional-service-user, interviewer-interviewee, student-educator and child-adult relationships. All of these come along with an unequal distribution of power that needs to be critically scrutinised when achieving reciprocal practices and policies aiming to enhance the well-being of individuals. Reciprocal practices focus on processes that flow two ways, which is an immediate challenge to the hierarchical order of a variety of formal and informal relationships relevant to social work. Reciprocity seems to be particularly important for people who are dependent upon others and are often described as those who 'receive' rather than 'give'. In this book, we have seen various authors outline the ways in which discourses (and, indeed, policies and practices) related to 'risk' can provide a barrier to achieving equality in relationships. Unfortunately, in public discourse, needing help is often described and experienced as shameful and stigmatising. In addition, prevalent discourses on 'scrounging', 'parasitism' and 'burdens' cast social actors in unhelpful relationships with and to one another.

Is it possible to increase reciprocity in professional or formal relationships? Service-users of social work might say that they are not heard. People can feel as if the professional is only taking care of their duties rather than also caring for them and listening to them as another human being. Understanding the nature of reciprocity offers social work and social policy possibilities to see how inequalities or social problems are generated in a community setting – for instance, in mutual, intergenerational or even professional relationships. This understanding may create a good basis for acknowledging that difficulties are often community-based, not just individual. If social work professionalism and social policy practice are developed reciprocally, they require at least two different kinds of change in their professional approaches.

First, there is a need to further develop the equality between professionals and service-users in mutual encounters. When reciprocity is based on a sense of equality, people are helped on their own terms. This kind of professionalism requires professionals to engage with service-users and work with them to solve life challenges rather than viewing them from a fixed professional position. Even in challenging situations that require the social worker to prioritise the rights of someone who is vulnerable (for example, in child protection), it is still important that understanding is shown to the service-user. There is a sense that both parties can learn from each other and feel and show empathy or sympathy, which generates respect, interest and

trust in others. When a professional relationship is reciprocal, it is empowering, both for the professionals and the service-users. Both have a feeling that they are valued as persons with their own knowledge and experiences. They have a feeling that they are making decisions together, respecting both parties. There may not always be an agreement of opinions, but there is a possibility to feel understood.

Second, in terms of understanding the collective nature of reciprocity, there is an urgent need for community-based services and methods that value people's own capacities to solve problems and find solutions to them. Sometimes, individual support is enough, but often, the nature of difficulties is community-based, for instance, in loneliness or bullying. In these situations, there should be more ways to support the individual in their communities and work with communities recognising common similar life experiences. In this way, people can get a feeling that they are not alone with their difficulties and can share their experiences or interests. Creating these kinds of helping and supporting communities is not only a question of social or health services – it has implications for inter-professional, whole community planning, including, for instance, use in workplaces, schools, day care, elderly care and housing that respects, supports and builds on citizens' own social networks and commitments. This understanding demands the development of services and professional work that respects people's own wishes and resources and the exploration ways of working with people and their communities.

As we have seen throughout the book, reciprocity is a fundamental human philosophy and practice that takes different forms in different historical periods and cultural settings. It is a concept at the heart of a philosophical framework and is expressed in shared action and trust between individuals and their communities in a variety of forms. It is both 'common' and 'profound'. Reciprocity is profound in the sense that practiced positively, it enhances the equality and well-being of people. It draws on the resources and skills of people, foregrounding their strengths and acknowledging their vulnerabilities. It offers a vision that promotes interdependence, mutual respect and co-learning and moves us away from individualistic models of health and social care to a collective vision that understands and locates people in their various networks (family, friends, peers and geographic and interest communities). It endorses models of policy and practice that work with strengths and resources, not only of individual clients but also of collectives. Practices that begin from the standpoint of enablement and mutual respect lead to a variety of enabling roles that usefully support, rather than undermine, people's own agency and resources.

The chapters of this book emphasise that everyone has something to give and that being able to reciprocate – as well as behave respectfully – is essential for one's well-being and self-esteem. The chapters also raise the need for future qualitative and quantitative research into reciprocity focussing on experiences of bidirectionality, receiving and giving within welfare services,

and social work and society at large as ways of challenging existing hierarchical power relationships. The theme of the book also calls for the use of collaborative and creative methods in practice, research and education as well as the co-production of professional and experiential knowledge and mutual learning.

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